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ABSTRACT

The most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reports suggest that the issue of declining quality in American education may be more complex than media accounts have portrayed it. If one looks at isolated communication skills, it appears that many students understand the fundamentals of reading and writing. The results also indicate that achievement levels have remained relatively stable across time for older students and may be improving for younger students. Although blacks and students in disadvantaged urban areas still tend to perform below national levels, in many instances they have either shown marked improvements or at least narrowed the gap between themselves and the rest of the nation. However, NAEP data suggest that curricula still emphasize instruction in competent skills apart from the "application" of these skills. Many students show difficulty with tasks requiring higher-order skills. Declines in inferential reading comprehension and in many writing tasks requiring critical thinking may reflect dwindling resources for teaching application and analytical skills. The results suggest that increased spending combined with placing instructional priority on the basics may have helped improve these skills, but the emphasis on the basics has not helped students develop higher order skills such as inference, analysis, or evaluation. Instructional priorities should be broadened to include higher level communication skills. Students need more time learning to read and write, and more time reading and writing to learn. (HTH)

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9. How Well Can Students Read and Write?

The Issue

Increased attention and concern about students' reading and writing abilities comes in the wake of much publicity about a "crisis" in the quality of American education. Articles have been appearing regularly in magazines and newspapers across the country lamenting declines in Scholastic Aptitude Test scores, citing the gloomier findings from National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reports and playing up the complaints of colleges and employers about "illiteracy" among recent high school graduates.

Results from NAEP actually suggest the issue may be more complex than media accounts have made it. There is little evidence in the NAEP data that would support the idea that there is a reading or writing crisis. Most 17-year-old students have the basics of reading and writing well in hand. Yet too many young people (about 5 to 10 percent) still graduate from high school without the basic reading and writing skills they need to survive in today's world. Also, across all ages students appear to have difficulty making complex inferences from their reading and examining, elaborating or explaining their ideas in writing. Many students who do seem to know language conventions and have general reading and writing skills do not communicate well.

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NAEP Reading and Writing Assessments

Since 1969, the National Assessment has been reporting information about changing levels of educational achievement across the country in various learning areas. The educational attainments of 9-, 13- and 17-year-olds, as well as young adults, have been surveyed. Reading has been assessed three times: 1971-72, 1974-75 and 1979-80. Assessments of reading typically required students to read a short story or article and then answer multiple-choice questions about what they read. A few assessment items required students to write about what they read. An additional set of items required students to demonstrate knowledge of various study skills associated with reading.

Writing has also been assessed three times: 1969-70, 1973-74 and 1978-79. Students responded to a variety of tasks that required descriptive, narrative, persuasive and explanatory writing. The students' writing was evaluated in a number of ways, including overall judgment of quality, ability to accomplish the purpose of the task, the cohesion and coherence of the paragraphs, and the correctness of grammar, punctuation and spelling.

How Well Do Students Read and Write?

As with most things, there is some good news and some bad news. First, the good news. If one looks at isolated communication skills and understandings, there is much to be pleased about concerning what might be defined as low-level or minimal literacy.

When given tasks considered appropriate to their age level, many students appear able to:

READ and

- comprehend explicitly stated ideas
- comprehend even implicit relationships between ideas, if they appear close enough together in a text
- give initial reactions or judgments about what they have read
- interpret simple charts and graphs
- use basic reference materials such as card catalogues and dictionaries
- understand the utility and importance of reading for a variety of purposes

WRITE and

- o use complete sentences and paragraphs with few mechanical errors
- o convey straightforward information in short notes and letters
- o present ideas and experiences with some fluency and coherence
- o tell brief, unelaborated stories

Besides this strong evidence from recent National Assessments that most students understand the fundamentals of reading and writing, the results indicate that achievement levels have remained relatively stable across time for older students and may be improving for younger students.

- o In READING, in the last decade 9-year-olds' overall performance rose 3.9 percent. The overall reading performance of 13- and 17-year-olds remained stable.
- o In WRITING, trends between 1970 and 1979 indicate an increase in the overall quality of narrative writing performance for 9-year-olds. At ages 17 and 13, narrative and business letter writing improved or remained at the same level. A majority of students at each age demonstrated control over the conventions of writing, but a minority (10 to 25) percent appeared to have serious problems with writing.

Further good news must be noted concerning the results for blacks and students attending school in disadvantaged-urban areas. Although these students still tend to perform below national levels, in many instances they either showed marked improvement or at least narrowed the gap between themselves and the nation.

- o In READING, between 1971 and 1980 at all three age levels, students in the southeast, blacks and males narrowed the gap between themselves and the nation. At age 9, the largest gains during the 1970s were among black students (9.9 percent), student's who reside in the southeast (7.5 percent) those who attend schools in rural areas (6.0 percent) and those who attend schools in disadvantaged urban areas.
- o In WRITING, during the 1970s black students improved either absolutely or relatively on almost all writing tasks given to 13- and 17-year-olds and one task given to 9-year-olds. At age 17, the disadvantaged-urban group made steady gains over the decade.

Now for the bad news. Much has been written, including a statement prepared by the National Council of Teachers of English, about the need to teach more than just literal comprehension skills and the basic conventions of written language. Educators stress the importance of students' ability to think and reason logically and communicate effectively. However, NAEP data suggest that the curriculum still emphasizes instruction in component skills apart from the application of these skills.

When given tasks considered appropriate to their age levels, many students evidenced difficulty with tasks requiring higher-order skills.

In READING, students had difficulty in:

- o comprehending implicit relationships established across more than one paragraph
- o using strategies necessary for analyzing or evaluating what they read

In WRITING, students had difficulty in:

- o elaborating and developing their ideas and feelings
- o using writing for generalizing, analyzing, hypothesizing or defending a point of view

Changing achievement patterns may signal further cause for concern. Declines in inferential reading comprehension at age 17 and in many writing tasks requiring critical thinking may reflect dwindling resources for teaching application and analytical skills:

- o In READING, the performance of 17-year-olds on inferential comprehension tasks declined significantly (2.1 percent) during the 1970s.
- o In WRITING, at ages 17 and 13, persuasive and descriptive skills appeared to be declining across the last decade.

Finally, it should be noted that gains evidenced by younger students in groups traditionally considered disadvantaged are being accompanied by declines in groups usually considered advantaged. In particular, the older and better students do not appear to be keeping up with their counterparts in earlier assessments. In many instances, differences in performance--between advantaged and disadvantaged students, between males and females, between 13-year-olds and 17-year-olds--may be decreasing, but overall performance is not improving.

What Are the Implications for Policy and Instruction?

Several factors may have contributed to the general student competence in basic skills, as well as the improvements in reading and writing performance for 9-year-olds and several groups of low achievers. First, during the 1970s federal support for education was targeted heavily toward disadvantage groups, particularly for the younger students. Second, during this same period, states and local school districts placed an increasing emphasis on mastery of basic skills.

The NAEP results suggest that increased spending combined with placing instructional priority on the basics may have helped to improve these skills. At the same time, however, the emphasis on basics seems not to have helped students require higher order skills such as inference, analysis or evaluation.

Instruction priorities should be broadened to include higher level communication skills.

Students need:

- more time learning to read and write
- more time reading and writing to learn

Reading and writing are recursive, interactive processes that should involve examination, reasoned thought, discussion and judgments. Good instructional programs will foster continuous reading and writing development through practice with increasingly difficult communications tasks set across a variety of content areas.

What to Read

Glatthorn, Allan A. Writing in the Schools, National Association of Secondary School Principals, Reston, Virginia, 1981.

Reading Comprehension of American Youth: Do They Understand What They Read? Report 11-R-02, Denver, Colo.: National Assessment of Educational Progrss, Education Commission of the States, 1982. ISBN 9-89398-223-7. $5.90

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Standards for Basic Skills Writing Programs, The National Council of Teachers of English, 1979.

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Writing Achievement, 1969-79: Results From the Third National Writing Assessment, Volume I, II and III, Reports 10-W-01, 10-W-02 and 10-W-03, Denver, Colo.: National Assessment of Educational Progress, Education Commission of the States, 1980. Volume I $7.00, Volume II $6.00, Volume III $6.00

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